

Grenz and Franke’s Post-Foundationalism and the Religion Singularity

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Abstract: Termed the “religion singularity” by Kenneth Howard, the habitual fragmentation of institutional Christianity has led to the exponential growth in denominations and worship centers despite the annual growth rate of new believers remaining the same. Howard has concluded that denominations are unlikely to survive this crisis, although worship centers are much more likely to survive if they are willing to be flexible. The purpose of this article is to identify the epistemic trends that have led to the destabilization of institutional Christianity over the last century, namely the shifting worldview from modernity to postmodernity, and how this shift has influenced the rise of nondenominational house church attendance in American Christianity.

Keywords: Foundationalism, Institutional Christianity, Nondenominational Churches, Religion Singularity, Postmodernity

Introduction

IN *TRANSFORMING MISSION*, DAVID Bosch identified and defined six epochs of Christianity that have taken shape in the past 2,000 years, the last of which he calls “the emerging, ecumenical paradigm.” Bosch explains that Christians in each era believed they were faithful to God’s intent for mission, but the individual paradigms were profoundly different.¹ Concerning the present era, Bosch writes, “The Christian church in general and the Christian mission in particular are today confronted with issues they have never even dreamt of and which are crying out for responses that are both relevant to the times and in harmony with the essence of the Christian faith.”² Nearly thirty years later, Kenneth Howard identified one of these new and unforeseen quandaries facing effective Christian mission in what he calls the “religion singularity.” The idea is based on Ray Kurzweil’s prediction that “the exponentially increasing processing power of artificial/machine intelligence would overtake the rate of increase of unaugmented human intelligence by the mid-twenty-first century ... and would mark the end of humanity as we know

¹ Bosch defines “mission” as referring “primarily to the *missio Dei* (God’s mission), that is, God’s self-revelation as the One who loves the world.” He uses the term “Christian mission” to describe the participation of Christians in the *missio Dei*, such as engaging in the “realities of injustice, oppression, poverty, discrimination, and violence.” He adds, “Mission includes evangelism as one of its essential dimensions [and is defined as] the proclamation of salvation in Christ to those who do not believe in him, calling them to repentance and conversion, announcing forgiveness of sin, and inviting them to become living members of Christ’s earthly community and to begin a life of service to others in the power of the Holy Spirit” (David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991], 10–11).

² *Ibid.*, 188.

it.”³ In brief, Howard corresponds “singularity” to the exponential surge in Christian denominations and worship centers, especially in the last one hundred years. Noting that since the worldwide Christian growth rate is projected to remain the same, Howard forecasts a dramatic transformation of institutional Christianity.⁴ Due to these projections and more, present-day Christians are forced to ask if their faith can survive in this latest epoch. Howard believes survival is possible, but only if the fragmentation of Christianity subsides. Thus, he recommends Christian leaders experiment with less building-centric worship centers.

The purpose of this article is to explain the epistemic undercurrents of the “religion singularity” as it pertains to the current era of Christian mission. In particular, twenty-first century Christians are observing the transition of its faith into a new epoch based on the shifting from modernity to postmodernity. After summarizing Howard’s findings, the article will identify how this shifting worldview has also induced a change from the epistemic system of foundationalism to post-foundationalism, as well as how the change can produce the possibility for Christian mission to continue despite the collapse of institutional Christianity. In fact, recent trends in American Protestantism suggest that nondenominational house churches will become increasingly prominent in the post-foundationalist era.

A Summary of the Religion Singularity

Howard first explains that institutional Christianity is in a state of crisis. At the turn of the twentieth century, Christianity was represented by 1,600 denominations; but by the 1950s, there were 9,300.⁵ Within just fifty years, Christianity split into six times the amount of denominations than it had in its first nineteen centuries of existence. The number continued to accelerate, becoming 34,200 at the turn of the twenty-first century and it grew even more to 45,000 by 2014.⁶ It has been projected that either the influx of Christian denominations will plateau at 97,000 by the year 2100 or it will continue to accelerate to 240,000.⁷ At the same time, the total number of worship centers has exponentially grown, as well. From approximately 400,000 centers in 1900 to one million in 1950, the number continued to climb to 3.5 million at the turn of the century and exceeded 4.7 million by 2014. It is also projected that the number of worship centers will grow to 7.5 million by 2025 and reach 66.3 million by the year 2100.⁸

What makes these numbers significant is that while the annual growth rate for Christianity continues to remain the same (1.32% growth), the number of believers is exceeded by both the growth in number of denominations (1.98%) and worship centers (2.4%).⁹ Thus, the worldwide Christian population growth rate is 33% less than denominational fragmentation and 41% below the spread of worship centers. In the twentieth century alone, the number of denominational members dropped from 349,000 to 58,000 and may continue to decrease to 17,500 (95% less) by the end of the twenty-first century. Likewise, the number of Christian

³ Kenneth W. Howard, “The Religion Singularity: A Demographic Crisis Destabilizing and Transforming Institutional Christianity,” *International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 7, no. 2 (2017): 77, <http://dx.doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/cgp/v07i02/77-93>.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 77–78.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 83–84.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

churches will need to take account of the epistemic shifts occurring in theology and identify how to maintain a stable identity while denominations and congregations continue to fragment around them. Of course, only time will tell whether the epistemic change from foundationalism to post-foundationalism will, in fact, curb the rapid division occurring in Christianity or if it will only proliferate the ever-increasing percentage of religious “nones” in the world.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Darren Slade and the Editorial Advisory Board of SHERM journal for the opportunity to contribute to its first issue.